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AMWELL



THE ANCIENT VILLAGE, AMWELL

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FLEMINGTON, N. J.

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The Ancient Village, Amwell

That process in the forwarding and developing of civilization which we call manufacturing, had, in the central part of the Township of Amwell, Hunterdon County, New Jersey, its beginning in the building of a mill on the east bank of a rill which flows from a spring on the northern slope, near the summit, of the Sourland Ridge, nearly 100 yards east of the road which extends from Ringoes to Rocktown. The spring from which this rill flows is small, and the rill itself is small; but when it has flowed nearly 200 yards, tributaries to it, from other springs along the northern brow of the ridge, swell its flow until it is increased many fold—until it becomes a streamlet, as it forces its way down the steep hillside, powerful to carry with it soil and other debris, and to erode the underlying indurated rock, so that during the eons during which it has been there flowing, it has, from its bed and its banks, carried away the soil, worn away the indurated rock, and transported the debris, till it has eroded in the steep slope down which it flows, a gorge, the higher bank of which is along the eastern side of the rill.

Save where interrupted by the dams constructed for milling purposes, from the site at which the several streamlets join to make the stream once called Mill Brook, but now called Clearwater Rill, till it reaches the plain which skirts Mallard Rivulet, a tributary of the Neshanic, it abounds in rapids, purling, hurrying, plashing currents, and small cascades, one of which, near the site of the oldest mill, when first I saw this stream, was about ten feet high, so rapid is its flow, and so picturesque the spectacle it makes.

To afford a notion of the value of this little rill for the purpose of driving the machinery of mills, distilleries, factories, etc., I need to state that the site upon which was the largest dam (the only one now existent) is fully 100 feet higher than the water in the wheel-pit beneath the wheel which drives the machinery of the lowest mill on this stream—the so-called Old Dawlis Mill, still in use—on the plain which skirts the slope of the Sourland. Readily it is seen that between the mill upon the plain, at the terminus of the slope, and the dam built for the storing of water for mill and factory purposes, allowing 20 feet for the diameter of each wheel, there might be at the least five overshot wheels, to drive the machinery of as many mills, the same water flowing from the wheel-pit of one wheel, on and into the buckets of another overshot wheel, on to the end of the series—as was actually the case when the ancient village of Amwell was mart and manufacturing center for that part of the county of Hunterdon surrounding this village for many miles. The more easily—indeed, with the greatest ease possible—was this effected,—as may be seen by the topography of the area through which the rill flows,—because the eastern bank of the rill, all along, rises steeply up—in some places to the height of about 30 feet,—so that to secure a suitable supply of water to any mill wheel, there was needed only a suitable excavation in the bank for a race leading from the rill up to a site opposite to the site upon which the mill was built, terminating in a suitable excavation and an embankment to hold the water conducted thereto, to be in readiness to use when needed. In any case, the trunk leading from the forebay to the wheel-box was short—not more than 30 feet.

Such being the condition of the eastern bank of the rivulet, all the

mills and factories (of which there were six—two grist mills, a rye and corn distillery, an oil mill, a cider mill and brandy distillery, and a sawmill) were on the eastern side of the rill, so located that the water, when it had driven the first wheel, from the first wheel-pit was conducted by a race along the sloping eastern bank of the rill to a forebay opposite to the mill or factory next below. Thus arranged, the water from the uppermost, that is, the highest, dam of the stream (for of dams of this stream, there were three, each assisting in the gathering of water to aid in the driving of the mills below), which drove the wheel of the first mill, in turn, drove the wheel of each mill below.

When, 58 years ago, with boy relatives and boy neighbors, I first visited this place to enjoy the sport of swimming, and to learn how well the boys of this district were provided with accommodations to learn this useful art, and to enjoy the sport thereof, the three dams still existed, but only one factory and one mill remained, the sites of the other edifices, however, being well marked by scattered elements of their ruins. Though the water of the upper and largest dam was sufficient to accommodate any who went merely to swim, yet, to be able to say that I had tried not only the best in that vicinity, but all which there was thereabouts, at succeeding visits I tried the waters, and the mud under them, of which there was an abundance, of the other two dams; and while thereat, visited and critically examined the ruins of the edifices which had served their turns and were then hard upon the road to obliteration.

Four mills in the upper part of this row were so built, by excavating the bank against which they stood, that between the buildings and the race was a spacious drive, the surface of which was almost level with the third floor of each mill or factory, so that, viewed from the west, each building seemed to consist of four stories, while viewed from any point on the east—especially from the road which passed by the eastern side of it—it seemed only two stories high. In this was great advantage in the unloading of the contents of wagons into the mills and other buildings into which produce was delivered,—since, in those days during which a sparseness of machinery was the rule, to unload things which passed down an inclined plane—which usually was a smooth board, one end resting in the wagon, the other extending down into the mill—was easier and quicker than to unload those which had to be lifted or carried to upper stories by devices then in use. And then, as a driveway extended along the rear of these mills, between them and the rill, to load things, especially out of the upper stories of the mills, was handy and labor-saving. So, in point of handiness, and convenience of approach, these mills, factories, and distilleries were accounted the best which, by the working of what nature supplied into what an ingenious, thrifty, progressive, industrious people needed to develop the arts and promote prosperity and refinement, could be.

On the west side of the rill, the bank is not high at any point, and in most places, it rises gently up to the height of a few feet, then the surface more gently slopes up and stretches far westward into pleasant fields and delightful meadows.

On this slope, hardly farther from the rill than enough to be safe against unundating water in time of a severe freshet, were built upon piling, cattle pens enough to accommodate 500 steers, hog pens enough to accommodate 1,000 swine, and other buildings necessary to shelter horses and wagons enough to accommodate those who carried on the enormous business of this place in those early times, and sheep enough to make wool and object of industry of those who owned homes here and lived by the business they had in hand.

All which I have described, and many more things hardly less important, occupied less than four acres of ground, so compactly built was this flourishing village of the past. These mills formed a center around which

other important interests were arranged. East of the old Dawlis Mill—the oldest of the mills,—was Lawrence Marr's blacksmith shop—famous for its "equipments to do anything, in blacksmithing, which any man needed to have done"—and its owner seems, by many papers which I have handled, to have had money enough to enter into any bargain presented at those early times, and sharpness enough to get the best of it, no matter how sharp the fleecer on the other side.

On the west side of the rill, opposite to the old mill, and less than a hundred yards away, was a wheelwright establishment in which were built wagons and whatever farmers' tools the farmers hereabouts needed. A hundred yards farther west was the old store once owned and operated by Major John Stevenson, the foundation and cellar walls of which are yet easily seen. A hundred feet farther west stands the building, much altered in appearance, as well as in usefulness, by remodeling and additions thereto made a little more than 40 years ago, which 150 years ago was the most important tavern in the township of Amwell—the tavern once owned and kept by Philip Ringo. North of this, on the east side of the "King's highway" from Trenton to Easton, Brigadier-General Nathan Price built his house and therein reared his large family and spent the years of his senility. That building still stands. When built, the road—the "King's highway"—extended in front of it—on the west side; it now extends on the east side of it. North of the old tavern is still standing the house built by him who first supplied the village of Amwell with shoes. Three hundred yards farther south stands yet—but now converted into a wagonhouse owned by ex-Sheriff Jacob Dilts—the building in which Hunt kept store,—which store, during the Revolution, was plundered by a detachment of British soldiers sent from Trenton to ascertain whether it contained silk fabric or arms or ammunition. Northeast of the old mill, and less than a half mile away, was a brass foundry, to which, to purchase brass mountings for harness, etc., from Manhattan, Kingston, Albany, and Troy, and elsewhere, came those who needed such wares; a pottery, wherein were made the best of earthen pots, dishes, etc.; a brickyard, which supplied bricks to the earliest settlers; and Hontel Campbell's saddle tree factory, to which, in 1724, came the apprentice, Henry Landis, from Germantown, Pa., to buy saddle trees for his master.

Up the road eastward,—on the north side of what is now the old driftway,—from lands owned by John Swallow, was a line of houses in which workmen lived, and some of which were occupied by slaves—in one of which was born black Jack Gray, a well-known negro in this vicinity a few years ago. The house stood in the woods on what is now the farm of John Blackwell. Forty years ago remains of it were abundant. Farther up were other houses, in one of which lived that Irish weaver, Matthew Thompson, celebrated for keenness of wit and ability as a fiddler—whose name and sayings were yet in the mouths of the old folks hereabouts 45 years ago. The location of his house and weaveshop and the well from which he drank is still marked by a heap of stones fallen from the crumbling walls, and the outline of the fireplace in which his good wife cooked for him can yet be easily traced. In short, on the north side of this old road, till it meets the road from Unionville to Rocktown, a distance of nearly a mile, at short intervals, were houses, a few of which still stand, and the remains of many others of which are easily found.

It may be important to state that this old road (now a driftway) along which so many houses stood, extended eastward over the ridge from the village Amwell to the road which once extended from Flemington to Dierdorf's Corner (now Larison's Corner) down Dutch Lane, thence southward by Wyckoff's Tavern, then up and over the Sourland Mountain to Snyder-town (then Philip Ringo's mill), then to Pennington. From Flemington to Trenton, it was the nearer way, and the way generally traveled—until that

part of it from the south end of Dutch Lane to Snyderstown was vacated.

Such was Amwell in the days of her glory. She reached her culmination about the end of the 18th century. Her decline was as rapid as her rise in importance. On other sites favorable to the same kinds of business, mills, factories, stores, and taverns were built and so managed that they became her rivals and shared with her what once only Amwell could do. Such was the milling and manufacturing interest at Alexaukin, where the stream is crossed by the Old York Road, whereat were a grist mill, a sawmill, an oil mill, a foundry, and shops for blacksmithing, wheelwrighting, chair making, weaving, shoe making, and almost anything else which a citizen of Amwell Township at this time could use. Such an interest was farther up that stream, whereat were Phillips' Mills—grist mill, sawmill, oil mill, cider mill, rye and apple distillery, and all the necessary appurtenances thereto to make these industries prosperous, and the place, during her activity, noted. Such was Headquarters (then called Opdycke's Mills) when Opdycke operated thereat a grist mill, a sawmill, and a distillery which supplied swill enough for a thousand hogs and refuse enough to feed 500 steers. Such, too, was the old-time settlement at Neshanic Ford, as was called the manufacturing interest at the site northeast of the site at which, a mile west of Reaville, that stately bridge spans the Neshanic. Other rivals sharply contended with Amwell for equality or superiority, till much of what otherwise would have been done at Amwell was done elsewhere, and less efficient men managed the affairs of Amwell until she was fairly second rate in the struggle for being, then worse grew, then waned into insignificance, and now, during many years, has had only the old woolen mill, fast falling to earth, and the second mill which Dawlis built, as the sole remnants of what was once the leading—the most thriving—village of Amwell Township, as she was known to men 125 years ago.

What I have written might imply that the six mills above mentioned were built, owned, and operated by one man, and that they were contemporary each with the other. Not so. In December of 1727, William Dawlis purchased of Nathan Allen, then the sole agent of his sister, "Experience Field, widow and relict of Benjamin Field," who, as one of the proprietors of West New Jersey, had surveyed to him in 1702, 3,000 acres of the 150,000 acres of the Indian purchase above the Falls of the Delaware, lying in or near the center of what afterwards became (May, 1708) Amwell Township of Burlington County, later Hunterdon County, N. J., 265 acres of land, the field notes of the survey of which are as follows:

"Beginning at a heap of stones or a post for a corner it being also Peter Woolever's corner in John Swallow's line from thence along his line east 40 chains to a Spanish oak for a corner from thence south 16 chains to a small black oak marked for a corner from thence south southeast 25 chains to a hickory tree marked for a corner from thence southwesterly 48 degrees 47 chains to a small black tree marked for a corner from thence north westerly 30 degrees 11 chains to a white oak for a corner from thence southwesterly 66 degrees 9 chains to another of the aforesaid Woolever's corners from thence north by his line (erased) chains to the first mentioned corner containing 265 acres besides the accustomed allowance for highways."

Doubtless when Dawlis purchased this tract he knew its value for milling purposes; for during the following year, south of the northern boundary of his tract, he built the first grist mill in the central part of Amwell, till this day known to all versed in the early history of New Jersey as the Old Dawlis Mill. So popular was this mill, and so extensively was it patronized that in less than seven years, its capacity was insufficient to accommodate those who wished to patronize this venturesome, enterprising, wealthy citizen of Amwell, then rapidly increasing in population and importance among the townships of New Jersey. To satisfy the needs of the times, he looked about for another millseat, and looked not long till he found one. The water from

the wheel of his mill flowed only a few feet till, down the steep descent northward, it plunged into miniature cascades, dashed over rocks, and splashing and foaming, leaped through the deep winding ways which it had worn in the indurated shale rock of that slope, till at the terminus of the slope, at a distance of about a hundred yards from the old mill, it gently flowed off to join the waters of Mallard Rivulet. The fall of the water in the rill, from the wheelpit of the old mill to the site at which he excavated for the wheelpit for the new mill is 30 feet. Here, then, in the lands of one John Swallow, whose lands bounded on the north, for a long way east and west, lands owned by Dawlis, was a site for another mill,—which could be built at slight cost, if the water right could be secured at a price sufficiently low, as the only expenditure needed to supply water to drive the machinery of the new mill would be the outlay necessary to excavate a race and the necessary accessories from the tailrace of his mill to the brow of the knoll which, nearly level with the wheelpit of the mill already built, was there an escarpment nearly as high as the roof of the mill which he was planning to build.

To consummate what he thought feasible, he purchased of the said John Swallow, Feb. 9th, 1735, 1½ acres of land, through which flowed Clearwater Rill. The field notes of this survey are as follows:

"Beginning at a white oak in the aforesaid William Dawlis' line from thence northeasterly from the mill along the said line 16 rods to a stake from thence westerly across the brook that the said Dawlis' mill stands on 15 rods to another stake from thence southerly 16 rods to a hickory tree in the said Dawlis' line from thence easterly 15 rods to the first station containing 1½ acres."

Hereon, in 1736, he built the second grist mill—standing till this day, and now owned and operated by Edwin S. Gimson. These two are the only uses of the rill by William Dawlis, the builder of the first mill in the central part of Amwell, as Amwell Township then was, of which I have any knowledge.

His son, Harmon Dawlis, continued the interest for a while by operating the two grist mills only—the upper and the lower—as he styled them. But in the course of events, flush with prosperity, which enkindled the fire of venture inborn, and urged forward by his patrons, he built the distillery for maize and rye. This mill stood less than a hundred yards south of the old mill—the wheelpit being near the site over which flows the rill,—the feeding facilities—the means of utilizing the remains of the mash or wort after the whiskey was distilled therefrom,—the cattle pens, hog pens, etc., being a little below on the opposite side of the rill—lower than the still works, so that the slops flowed through suitable troughs directly from the distillery to the pens where they were consumed. The water which drove the machinery of this distillery was taken from the race which led the water from the dam above to the old—the first built—mill. The capacity for consuming bushels of maize and rye per day, or the gallons of whiskey made, of this distillery, I have never seen stated. They who have handed down to us the capacity for doing work herein have their ratings in number of cattle and hogs fed by the slops, etc., after the whiskey was distilled from the wort. This rating was as above stated,—“enough to feed 500 cattle and 1,000 hogs.”

It may be well to remark passingly that in the earliest times in Amwell, and during many years thereafter, distilleries were the best markets for maize and rye,—they who maintained them paying the highest prices for what they bought and paying the most promptly,—as the products of the distillery were the readiest of sale, being commodities without which the earliest settlers hereabout would not do—whiskey being drunk by everybody, and beef and pork in large quantities consumed by all. The rivals which more than all else took business from Amwell, and precipitated her decline, were the distillery at Phillips' Mills, the one at Opdycke's Mills

(later Headquarters, now Grover), and the one at Neshanic Ford,—the capacity of each being nearly equal to that of the one at Amwell.

The other three mills were ventures of enterprising men other than the Dawlises. The sawmill was erected about 1730. It stood a little way north of the east end of the upper—the big—dam, as this dam, after Landis, in 1811, built the old woolen factory, was called, quite opposite the sawyer's house, which, by the way, was taken down by Amos Hunt, about 35 years ago.

The Old Dawlis Mill stood on the south side of the lane leading from the Trenton road in to that mill, up against the forebay; the distillery stood against the race, a few yards south of this mill, and received from the race the supply of water which drove its machinery. The water wheels which drove the machinery of these mills must have been small—not more than 20 feet in diameter. The woolen factory was built farther north—farther down the stream—in order that the wheel which drove its machinery might have a greater diameter and thus be driven by less water. In earlier times, mills were so built that their water wheels were less in diameter, and wider. Thus constructed, more water, per hour, was used to drive them; but in those times the streams were larger and there was little need to be frugal in the use of water.

Prior to the building of the woolen mill, the walls of which still stand, the upper dam was a rude structure, sufficient only to hold water to drive the sawmill. But the woolen mill, a very pretentious thing in the time in which it was built, needed a dam which would hold water enough, caught during the wetter part of the year, to drive the woolen mill and the lower grist mill continuously during the drier seasons; so, as the dam for the sawmill spanned the rill at a site at which, at each end, the banks rose steeply up to the height of many feet, the builder of the woolen mill secured the dam of the sawmill, and a right of those who owned adjacent lands, to raise it as high as would ever be needed to hold water enough, caught during the wet weather, to drive the factory uninterruptedly through the severest drought. Though the dam was never built so high as specifications allowed, the drought was long, and more than an ordinary quantity of water was used if the mill at any time was stopped by the want of water.

After the raising of the dam, the sawmill was no more—it had served its turn and now gave place to things which were more useful at that period of time to a progressive people.

The oil mill was only far enough down the rill to afford sufficient fall to use the water which flowed from the wheelpit of the sawmill. It was built about 1732, and operated till near the end of the 18th century.

The cider mill was the last of the ancient milling structures built upon the bank of this useful mill-driving rill. When orchards had hereabouts grown, to be able to manufacture the fruit thereof into cider, vinegar, or brandy, was a need which was supplied by building and operating this mill. The site upon which it stood was only far enough down the rill to afford fall to drive the wheel and the gearings thereto attached. It was profitably operated till well into the 19th century. The woolen factory was no part of the ancient village, as it was not built till 1811.

So much for the rill that from a spring nestled high up in the hill near Rocktown flows down the slope north of Rocktown into the basin of the Neshanic, to pour its waters into Mallard Rivulet. So much for the topography of its environs; so much for the mills and their accessories, and so much for the environing institutions necessary to a developing young settlement, which has each served its turn and passed away, or else is still serving the purpose for which it was built, growing less useful as time is passing, and is slowly but surely gliding into the inevitable, in which all things begin, endure for a while, and then end.

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